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Time to ratify SALT

The Senate Intelligence Committee has reported SALT II will make it easier for the United States to find out what the Soviets are up to than would be the case if the Senate rejects the treaty. The report is another forceful argument for speedy ratification.

Knowledge of the size and capability of the Soviet strategic arsenal is critical to U.S. defense planning. Take for example the mobile missile system designed to respond to concerns that in a few years U.S. land-based ballistic missiles would be theoretically vulnerable to a Soviet first strike.

The idea of the mobile system is to increase the number of targets the Soviets would have to destroy before they could be confident they had demolished the main part of the U.S. land-based missile fleet. If there are many more targets than the Soviets have warheads to hit, a first strike would not be decisive. The U.S. would still be able to render a devastating counterstrike.

But the system now favored by the administration, costly as it is, would be useless if the U.S. were not sure whether the Soviets had increased the number of their warheads so as to be able to strike all the new targets.

SALT II's prohibition of measures of "deliberate concealment" is a useful device for making sure the Soviets are living up to their end of the bargain and for determining, through vigilance, the true size of their arsenal. We cannot afford, with or without SALT II, to rely solely on Soviet assurances. We must be

able to see for ourselves. And the "deliberate concealment" ban makes it possible for the United States to insist that the Soviets cease and explain any questionable or ambiguous behavior that could be camouflaging a secret buildup.

The Senate committee report gives due weight to the importance of knowing what the Soviets have in the way of strategic arms. This point cannot be overstated. It shapes the whole U.S. defense strategy.

The Carter administration plan for mobile missiles, for example, was designed not only to comply with the SALT II provisions against concealment. The goal of the elaborate technological exercise of creating and evaluating various alternative plans was to produce a mobile missile system which, if the Soviets deployed a similar one, would not make it possible for them to increase their nuclear arsenal secretly. The precarious stability of the nuclear age depends not only on an even balance of strategic strength but also upon mutual confidence that the balance exists.

The Senate Intelligence Committee report is the last piece of information needed by the Senate in making its decision on SALT II. Any further delays are unnecessary. The debate has been thorough and vigorous [though sometimes, as during the silliness over Soviet troops in Cuba, well off the point]. The argument has gone decisively in favor of ratification. No real issues remain in doubt. The Senate should move quickly to ratify the treaty.